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ABSTRACT

A survey of 1,127 public two-year colleges was conducted to determine the extent to which the colleges had been involved in formalized needs assessment projects from 1976 through 1979, the strategies they had used in planning and conducting these studies, and the ways in which the colleges had used and benefitted from this research. Survey findings were then compared with data from the Higher Education General Information Surveys XI and XII to determine: (1) correlations between the extent of involvement in needs assessment projects with institutional and contextual characteristics such as institutional size, college wealth, and the population of the service district: and (2) correlations between these institutional and contextual characteristics and the reported outcomes of the needs assessments. Selected findings, based on a 32% response rate, reveal that 78% of the responding colleges had conducted at least one needs assessment since 1976. Over 50% had a separate office responsible for collecting needs assessment data, and over 60% employed some form of attitude survey. While 58% of the colleges felt that the studies increased their community responsiveness, only 41% indicated that the studies helped increase enrollment. The study report summarizes major findings and discusses areas for further study. (JP)

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A STUDY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES: INSTITUTIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL PREDICTORS

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A Study of Community College Needs Assessment Practices and Outcomes: Institutional and Contextual Predictors

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The research study is an exploratory survey of needs assessment practices in public community colleges. Key findings indicate that over 78% of community colleges responding to the survey have conducted at least one institution-wide needs assessment project during 1976-1979 to assist them in planning academic programs. Similarities between respondents to initial and follow-up mailings, and between the sample and the total population of community colleges suggest that institution-wide needs assessment projects have been conducted in the majority of public community colleges in the United States.

Presidents reported a variety of outcomes for their community colleges as a result of needs assessment projects. Considerable improvements in institutional planning and management and increases in awareness of and participation in college governance processes were reported. Effects on enrollment, allocation of resources, and interinstitutional relationships are much less evident. Analyses showed that three project characteristics influenced outcomes of needs assessments; official recommendation of projects by Governing Boards; existence of mechanisms in the project to evaluate the effectiveness of the method and procedure used; and the number of institution-wide needs assessment projects completed by the institution.

A Study of Community College Needs Assessment Practices and Outcomes: Institutional and Contextual Predictors

Cynthia L. Luna

The University of Michigan

Roundtable Presentation

Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

Los Angeles, April 1981

One of the most difficult tasks which I experienced in preparing this paper was in selecting which findings would be most useful to you in designing needs assessment projects for your institution, as well as those findings which would be most interesting to you as researchers and scholars as areas for further study.

The paper is arranged in several sections. In the first part, I'll provide some background on needs assessment and previous studies in that area. I'll next summarize the most important and useful findings of the study. In the final section, I'll identify issues raised by the study which suggest some interesting research questions.

Background

Definition.

First, let me describe what needs assessment is. Kotler (1976) described needs assessment as a systematic measurement process by which an organization: 1) may know the need differences which characterize different groups of its consumers; 2) may know the intensity of different needs that are unsatisfied; and 3) may be able to monitor need changes over time so that it does not suddenly find its products and services obsolete. Such a definition provided an especially strong justification for examining needs assessment practices which were part of institution-wide efforts for planning academic programs. For this particular study, needs assessment practices which were examined were those formalized, institution-wide projects conducted by community colleges to determine needs of potential or current learners or employers. Purposes of needs assessment projects in community colleges vary. However, in this

study, only those projects which were designed to provide data to plan and develop academic programs were examined.

Previous Studies.

Needs assessment is a vast and diverse topic which has received considerable attention in community college literature (Gleazer 1973a,1973b, 1974). Furthermore, the importance of a needs assessment project as a first step in institutional planning is emphasized by the recognition of needs assessment as a basis for long-range planning in Title III Basic and Advanced Institutional Development awards. In 1975, Witkin conducted an extensive review of needs assessment methods and kits used in elementary and secondary schools and identified those methods frequently used in colleges and universities. She limited her review to identifying strengths and weaknesses and advantages and disadvantages of various methods in popular use. However, Witkin's work was the first attempt to evaluate the usefulness of needs assessment based on characteristics of those methods. Lenning (1980) reviewed over 300 published and unpublished documents, and identified drawbacks in needs assessment frameworks and methods as reported in project final reports and published sources. He also categorized needs assessment methods into 30 categories based on general purposes of the projects.

Two other authors have also contributed to an understanding of the range of needs assessment methods currently in use. Brown (1974) related the range and scope of needs assessment methods used by continuing education directors in two-year state-supported colleges in New York to the size of continuing education program. His findings suggested a relatively low usage of surveys of learner/employer

attitudes both in large and small continuing education programs. Brazziel (1978) examined what needs assessment methods are used by various types of institutions. His study principally described how colleges and universities are using labor market data to project future trends.

Focus of the Study.

Nearly everyone writing about needs assessment practices has emphasized their importance; however, evaluation of the effects of those practices has been sorely lacking. In addition, a limited amount of data are available on the nature and extent of projects recently conducted in community colleges. For this reason, the present study was initiated to describe which community colleges were actually involved in needs assessment, how projects were designed in community colleges completing them, and the effects of these projects in community colleges which had made a commitment to conduct such projects.

In this study, I was interested in providing answers to questions in five major areas:

1) Nature and Extent of Involvement -- What is the nature and extent of involvement of public community colleges in institution-wide needs assessment practices?
2) Project Characteristics -- What are the general strategies (structure, process, and method) used to develop and implement needs assessment projects?
3) Outcomes -- What are the reported outcomes of these projects?
4) Institutional and Contextual Characteristics and Extent of Involvement -- What is the relationship between institutional and

contextual characteristics and the extent of involvement in more formalized needs assessment practices?

5) Institutional, Contextual, and Project Characteristics and Outcomes -- What is the relationship between institutional, contextual, and needs assessment project characteristics and the reported outcomes of these projects?

To answer these questions, I collected data using several different methods and a variety of data sources.

1) To draw conclusions about nature and extent of involvement of community colleges in needs assessment practices, characteristics of needs assessment projects, and project outcomes, I sent a questionnaire on needs assessment practices to presidents of the total population of 1127 public two-year colleges. A representative sample of responses from public community colleges was obtained with a final response rate of 32.2%.
2) To determine institutional and contextual characteristics of public community colleges, I extracted data from the Higher Education General Information Surveys (HEGIS) XI and XII collected by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Findings

Now let's look at findings from the study. In this part of the paper, I'll mention the most important findings in the five areas studied: 1) nature and extent of involvement; 2) project characteristics; 3) outcomes; 4) relationship of institutional and contextual characteristics to extent of involvement; and 5) relationship of institutional, contextual, and project characteristics to outcomes of needs assessment projects.

Nature and Extent of Involvement.

Most community colleges responding to the survey have conducted at least one needs assessment project. Over 78% of those responding indicated that they had conducted at least one institution-wide needs assessment project between 1976-1979 to assist them in planning academic programs. Similarities between respondents to initial and follow-up mailings, and between the sample and the total population of community colleges suggest with reasonable assurance that institution-wide needs assessment projects have been conducted in the majority of public community colleges in the United States.

Project Characteristics.

Needs assessment projects in community colleges generally are conducted by offices already responsible for collecting and analyzing data, or by individuals appointed by the president to complete project tasks. Over 50% of the community colleges responding indicated that design, data collection and data analysis responsibilities were assumed by institutional offices with this ongoing responsibility. Over 35% indicated that staff members specifically appointed by the president to conduct the project were responsible for completing these tasks. Consultants were infrequently used to assist in these functions; less than 20% of the institutions responding used consultants to complete design, data collection or analysis tasks.

In general, community colleges are using attitude surveys to identify needs of constituent groups. Over 60% reported using some form of survey method to collect these perceptions. Furthermore, only a small percentage (5.2%) reported using more than one method to identify these attitudes.

Needs assessment projects also appear to be generally initiated without the support of a formal commitment of institutional Governing Boards. Only 30% of public community colleges responding to the survey have formally established a Governing Board policy or a similar formal commitment supporting on-going needs assessment.

Outcomes.

Presidents reported a variety of outcomes for their community colleges as a result of needs assessment projects. Findings strongly suggest that considerable improvements in institutional planning and management processes are experienced in public community colleges as a result of projects. Effects are frequently cited in increasing responsiveness of the institutional planning process to community needs; a total of 57.7% reported that this outcome had been experienced considerably or to a great extent by their institutions. Furthermore, presidents generally reported that projects provided data that identified institutional priorities for planning and enhanced the development of valid institutional priorities, objectives and goals (reported by over 53% of those responding). A total of 46.2% of the presidents indicated that results of needs assessment projects have demonstrated trends in characteristics and goals of changing populations; over 41% indicated that projects have revealed new and discrepant expectations of different community groups for college services and programs. Overall, presidents in over 75% of the community colleges responding indicated that their institutions have been provided with data for new program development as a result of needs assessment projects.

Findings also suggested that, in a number of colleges, participation in and awareness of college governance processes are increased as a result of needs assessment. Effects are cited most frequently in increasing constructive involvement of supportive groups in the institutional planning process (a total of 38.4% identified a considerable or extensive increase), in increasing communication between the institution and community members (a total of 41.6% identified an increase), and in increasing understanding of community priorities by Governing Boards (a total of 35.6% indicated experiencing an increase in this area).

Effects in other areas are less evident. Presidents generally emphasized that relatively low effects were experienced on community college enrollments as a result of needs assessment projects. A total of 41.9% of the presidents identified that a minor increase had occurred in their total college enrollment as a result of needs assessment projects. A total of 50%, however, indicated that no change in enrollment had occurred. Over 41% identified that a minor increase in vocational enrollment had occurred as a result of needs assessment projects; a total of 45.1% indicated no change in vocational enrollments.

Findings also suggest that needs assessment projects had only a limited effect on establishing priorities for the allocation of institutional resources. Only 26.1% of the presidents identified that projects had provided data to allocate institutional resources according to need priorities.

Finally, results suggested that only limited effects are experienced in cooperative relationships between postsecondary

institutions as a result of needs assessment projects. A total of 88.2% of the presidents indicated that no change has occurred in cooperative relationships with other postsecondary institutions in their community as a result of needs assessment projects.

Institutional and Contextual Characteristics and Extent of Involvement.

Examination of results reveals that none of the institutional or contextual characteristics examined (Table 1) were significantly related to degree of involvement in needs assessment practices. Although community colleges with more than one campus and those in urban areas identified more frequently conducting more than one project, differences in degree of involvement are not large enough to be considered statistically reliable. Therefore, no relationship between institutional and contextual characteristics and extent of involvement in needs assessment was established in these preliminary analyses.

Institutional, Contextual, and Project Characteristics and Outcomes.

None of the institutional characteristics studied were significantly related to outcomes of needs assessment projects. However, several contextual characteristics were related to project outcomes. Community colleges receiving funds under the AID program reported greater improvement of planning and management processes than non-AIDP funded institutions. This finding is not especially surprising given the philosophy of AIDP, i.e. to assist developing institutions with improving institutional processes. Community colleges in suburban settings reported less effect on cooperation

between their institution and other postsecondary institutions in their community than colleges in nonsuburban settings. This difference may be a result of the size of communities in which suburban colleges are located which may contribute to reducing communication among postsecondary institutions within that area.

Analyses identified three characteristics of needs assessment projects which influenced outcomes experienced as a result of these projects. Significant differences on all outcome measures were evident in those projects in which an official recommendation for the project had been provided by Governing Boards. In addition, similar differences were evident, on those measures, for colleges which had incorporated a mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of the method and procedure used into the project design. Furthermore, greater improvement of planning and management and involvement in college governance processes were reported by presidents whose institutions had completed more than one needs assessment project.

Areas for Further Study

Results of this project suggest several areas which might benefit from further study and research.

Use of Results.

Many institutions identified not having an process already established to use results of projects in institutional planning as a problem which influenced project outcomes. Further research might examine if project outcomes are different in community colleges which did have such a process established for using results, prior to conducting their needs assessment project.

Long-range Effects of Needs Assessment Projects.

This study was an initial attempt to describe effects of needs assessment among community colleges. As an impact study, a repeated analysis of effects of these projects with additional data from multiple sources within these institutions would provide even stronger evidence of project outcomes.

Further Analysis of Involvement of Nonrespondents in Needs Assessment Practices.

The large percentage of nonrespondents to this survey poses interesting questions. The sample and the total population were established as statistically similar on specific institutional and contextual characteristics (population density of college location (SMSA), size of enrollment, geographical distribution, and state board structure). Furthermore, no differences which can be considered statistically reliable were evident on these characteristics according to time of return of the questionnaire. However, further polling of nonrespondents would establish with even greater assurance that the sample represents the total number of community colleges which had actually conducted needs assessment projects during 1976-1979.

Summary

In summary, I've attempted to describe some major conclusions about needs assessment practices in community colleges:

1) Most community colleges have conducted at least one institution-wide needs assessment project during 1976-1979;
2) Projects are generally designed and conducted by offices already responsible for collecting and analyzing data and by staff members specifically appointed by presidents to complete these tasks;

3) In general, community colleges are using attitude surveys to identify needs of constituent groups;

4) Needs assessment projects generally appear to be conducted without the endorsement of a formal Governing Board policy to conduct ongoing needs assessment;

5) Outcomes of needs assessment projects vary. Findings strongly suggest that considerable improvements in institutional planning and management have occurred as a result of needs assessment projects. In addition, increases in awareness of and participation in college governance are also reported. Effects on enrollment, allocation of resources and interinstitutional relationships are much less evident.

6) Three characteristics of needs assessment projects influenced project outcomes: evidence of official recommendation of projects by Governing Boards; evidence of a mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of the method and procedure used in the assessment; and the number of institution-wide needs assessment projects completed by the community college.

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Table 1

Class, Label, Measure and Source of Exploratory Variables Selected for Analysis

Class	Label	Measure	Source
I Institutional	Institutional Age	Year College Classes Began	1978 Community, Junior, and Technical College Directory
	Institutional Size I	Adm. Staff/ Student Enrollment	1) Survey Data 2) HEGIS 1976
	Institutional Size II	Adm. + Teach. + Prof. Support Staff/ Student Enrollment	1) Survey Data 2) HEGIS 1976
	Institutional Complexity		
	1) Campus Structural Complexity	No. of Campuses	Survey Data
	2) Administrative Complexity	No. of 2nd Level Executive Staff	Survey Data
	3) Program Complexity	No. of Academic Divisions	Survey Data
	Institutional Wealth	Total 1978-1979 Operating Budget/ Total Enrollment	1) Survey Data 2) HEGIS 1976
	Research Orientation	1) Existence of I.R. Office 2) No. of Prof. & Full-Time I.R. Staff	Survey Data Survey Data
	Student Body Characteristics	% of Non-Traditional Age Students	Survey Data
	Program Emphasis	1) FTE of Teaching Faculty in Occupational Programs 2) FTE of Teaching Faculty in Transfer Programs	Survey Data Survey Data
II. Contextual	Type of District	Rural, Suburban, Urban Classification	Survey Data
	External Agency Intervention	Identification of Intervention of Faculty Union, ACCtion, or AIDP	Survey Data
	Ethnic Composition of the Community College District	1) % Black 2) % White	Survey Data Survey Data
	State Board Structure	Type of State Board	State of Maryland Classification
	Population Density of the Community College District	City Size (SMSA) in Which District is Located	HEGIS 1977

Table 1

(Continued)

Class	Label	Measure	Source
III. Process	Focus	Focus of Project: Employer, Current Students, or Community Members	Survey Data
	Method	Categorization of Needs Assessment Method (by Type of Framework)	Survey Data
	Point of Origin	Identification of Source of Initiation of Project	Survey Data
	Formal Structure of Project		
	1) Official Recommendation	Identification of the Source of Recommendation	Survey Data
	2) Design Responsibility	Nature of Structure Responsible for Design	Survey Data
	3) Implementation/Data Collection	Nature of Structure Responsible for Data Collection	Survey Data
	4) Data Analysis	Nature of Structure Responsible for Data Analysis	Survey Data
	Preparation of Final Report	1) Nature of Structure Responsible for Preparing Final Report	Survey Data
		2) Identification of Who Received Final Report	Survey Data
	Existence of Evaluation of the Needs Assessment Project	Identification of Evidence of Evaluation of Effectiveness of Method and Procedure Used	Survey Data
	Degree of Presidential Involvement	1) Identification of Activities Performed by President	Survey Data
		2) Identification of Overall Degree of Involvement of President	Survey Data
	Involvement of Community Members	1) Identification of Activities Performed by Community Members	Survey Data
		2) Identification of Degree of Involvement of Groups of Community Members	Survey Data
		3) Identification of Overall Degree of Involvement of Community Members	Survey Data

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